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ABSTRACT

Previous studies of the relationship between employee participation in decision making and job satisfaction have conceptualized degree of participation as the number of decisions one influences (scope). To explore another dimension of participation- degree of influence--a model was used which emphasizes the balance between how much influence individuals have on the job and the amount they would like to have. Employees (N=760) from 11 divisions of a large western electronics manufacturer were surveyed. Two indices of degree of influence and a four-item scale of overall job satisfaction were used. Three states of balance (saturation, equilibrium, and deprivation), and three categories of desired and perceived influence (high, medium, low) were studied. Results showed that the more influence employees felt they had, the more satisfied they were with their job. Individuals at an equilibrium state of balance were found to report the highest degree of job satisfaction. The larger the discrepency between desired and available influence, the lower the reported job satisfaction. The present study suggests that a match between the individual's desire for participation and the permitted participation will lead to the most positive reactions to the job. (LLL)

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EMPLOYEE PARTICIPATION:

NOT NECESSARILY THE MORE THE BETTER

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Abstract

Employee participation is explored using a model which emphasizes the balance between how much influence individuals have on their job and the amount of influence that they would like to have. Previous research suggested the significance of job-person fit in explaining employee reactions to participation. The complex nature of participation was not previously addressed in such studies. There are at least two ways in which "degree of participation" can be conceptualized: the number of decisions one influences (scope) and the degree of influence one can exert (degree). Previous studies of participation balance employed only the scope conceptualization. Based on a survey of seven hundred and sixty employees in a large western electronics manufacturer, the present study confirmes the hypothesized curvilinear relationship between balance of degree of influence, and job satisfaction. Employees that report having approximately as much influence as they would like to have, were found to be the most satisfied with their job. The merit of employing the employee balance model are illustrated. Implications for managerial practices are briefly discussed and suggestions are made for further research.

Employee Participation:
A Question of Personal Balance

Introduction

Employee participation has fascinated scholars from Marx to March. A diverse set of practices and studies address this construct. Coch & French in 1948 published their famous manuscript on overcoming resistance to change. Lewin, during World War II, presented forceful findings on the impact participation can have on attitude change. Some more recent reports take a much more applied focus on participation (e.g., Bowers (1976), McConkey (1980), Bellow & Cleverley (1980) and Wingis (1981)). There seems to be continuous interest in the outcomes of participation (Locke, 1979; Latham & Yukl, 1978, Dickson, 1982). Several attempts have been made to relate participation dynamics to expectancy motivational theory (e.g., Neider, 1980). But there is relatively little consensus on what this concept means or how it should be measured.

The present paper views participation as a component of the person-environment fit model (Lewin, 1951). The goal here is to reinforce, and extend, a conceptualization of participation that is based on the balance between the influence that an employee would like to have on the job, and the influence that is available to him/her (Alutto & Belasco, 1972). Two related issues are addressed in this study: the curvilinear nature of the participation balance-job satisfaction relationship; and the extension of the balance framework to include another dimension of employee participation -- that of degree of influence.

Initially we will draw the distinction between "degree" and "scope" of participation; these two constructs will then be incorporated into the conceptual framework of participation balance.

Wood (1973) discusses employee participation in the context of power relationships, centralization and the sharing of decision making. Mitchell (1973) suggests the elimination of organizational and hierarchical barriers as the essence of participation in decision making (PDM). Walker (1974) and Heller, Drenth, Koopman and Rus (1977) refer to participation as a power continuum, suggesting a scale of six alternatives to reflect the "degree" of participation that a certain situation entails. The lowest level on the scale is associated with a unilateral decision by management where no information is made available to anyone except the decision makers themselves. Level 5 on the scale reflects joint decision making where supervisors and their subordinates together analyze the problem and come to a joint, egalitarian decision. At the highest level of influence (level 6) workers have complete control and authority . Conceptually the common premise of Mitchell's (1973), Walker (1974), Wood (1974) and Heller et al's (1977) discussions is that participation is best defined by the amount of power and influence employees exert on managerial activities.

The location of the power exchange adds another dimension to the study of participation. Vanek (1975) addressed the importance of delineation of the type of decisions that fall into the realm of a participatory system. For example, employees almost always have some decision about whether they show up to

work on a certain day, yet this is not considered a form of participation. Loveridge (1980) emphasized the fact that any organizational decision is composed of a sequence of choices; it is important to specify where in the sequence participation is to begin. In the same vein, Locke (1979) refers to "the context of a PDM experience", and identifies four broad categories of decisions: personnel functions, work planning, working conditions and company policies. Locke's categories are not always mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, his argument is that a different area of PDM implies a different perspective on the nature of the participatory experiences. It appears that Vanek (1975), Locke (1979) and Loveridge (1980) address the scope of participatory activities as an important component on the study of participation. That is, they conceptualize the "extent of participation" to be a function of the number, or variety of decisions where employee influence is permitted.

To summarize, a comparison of Vanek (1975), Locke (1979) and Loveridge (1980) to Walker (1974) and Heller et al (1977) suggests at least two dimensions of variation of PDM:

1. Scope: variety of issues (decisions) in which influence is permitted;
2. Degree: amount of information that is available to, and influence participants exert on what actually happens.

Alutto & Belasco (1972) emphasized the ideosyncratic meaning of participation. Their conceptualization stems from Lewin's (1951) theory of person-environment fit which suggests the

congruency between individual needs/abilities and environmental resources/demands as the critical determinant of individual reactions and well being. Alutto & Belasco (1972) suggest the discrepancy between a desired level of participation and the extent PDM is available to an individual as a typology of PDM. Hence, three states of PDM can exist: (1) Decisional Deparivation (employee would like more PDM than is available; (2) Decisional Equilibrium (employee has as much PDM as he/she would like); (3) Decisional Saturation (employee has more PDM than is desireable to him/her). Operationally, if PI is a a measure of how much participation an employee has, and DI indicates how much participation or influence an employee would like to have, then the difference (PI - DI) provides the individual's level of "Participation Balance". "Balance" is suggested as the appropriate index of participation when attempting to predict an employee's reactions to his/her job.

Previous studies on the outcomes of participation confirmed a positive, linear relationship between participation and satisfaction (e.g., Neider, 1980). The balance framework suggests that when individual desires for participation are incorporated into the model a different group of employees will be found to be the most satisfied -- those who are at a point of equilibrium.

Several studies have employed this definition of PDM and confirmed Alutto and Belasco's hypotheses about significant relationships between the degree of PDM and attitudinal outcomes (Eg: Alutto & Acito, 1974; Driscoll, 1978; Dickson, 1981). However all such studies have utilized the number of decisions in which employees participate as the measure included in the

balance variable. Thus researchers have examined the significance of the job-person fit with regard to the scope of participatory activities.

The present study examines the generalizability of Alutto & Belasco's postulations to a second dimension of participation, that of degree of influence. The contention here is that another dimension of participation, that of the degree of power and influence that an employee has, should also be examined from a "balance" point of view. Balance in the present study is operationally defined as the difference between the extent of influence that an employee has on the decision making process in his/her work and the extent of influence that he/she would like to have. It is hypothesized that employees at a state of equilibrium will be more satisfied than employees who are either deprived or saturated. A measure of perceived participation on the job was expected to be linearly related to job satisfaction. But the balance variable, the difference between desired and perceived influence, was hypothesized to bear a curvilinear relationship to job satisfaction with the middle point (equilibrium between desired and perceived influence) being associated with the highest level of job satisfaction.

Method

Overview

Data were collected at a large, western electronics manufacturer. The study was part of evaluating an employee participation program. All data were collected using a multiple choice survey questionnaires which were completed on company time

and on an anonymous, voluntary basis.

Subjects

The sample was comprised of 760 respondents employed in 11 divisions of the company. Approximately 800 employees were approached, of whom 760 responded to the survey (95% response rate). The majority of the respondents were manufacturing, blue collar workers. Forty eight percent (48%) were female. Subjects represented a spectrum of educational levels and tenure periods; most of the respondents had completed high school or 1 - 3 years of college, and most had been with the company between 1 and 5 years.

The Instrument

The survey was presented to employees as a "part of a study to understand how people feel about their work in this company". The total instrument included 170 multiple questions, including some classification questions. Employees were promised and provided feedback on the results of the study.

Measures

Scales and reliability (Cronbach's Alpha) coefficients are listed in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 About Here

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1. Degree of Influence

Two indices of degree of influence were constructed:

specific, problem solving influence and general influence on the job. Degree of Influence was defined in the questionnaire as "the amount of freedom and the opportunities you have to get invloved". Four items addressed specific influence:

How much influence do you have .....

1....in raising problems with the way your work is currently done.

2....in analyzing causes of current work-related problems.

3....in selecting solutions to work related problems

4....in implementing new solutions to work-related problems.

Three additional items addressed general influence on the job:

How much influence do you have .....

5....overall, on the way problems are dealt with (solved) in your unit?

6....over the quality of the work you do.

7....in general, over your work and work related factors.

Similar items questioned how much influence the respondent would like to have in each of the above areas.

2. Job Satisfaction

A four item scale of overall job satisfaction, suggested by Hoppock (1935) and validated by McNichols, Stahl & Manley (1978), was used. The overall satisfaction score was computed by summing the responses to these four items.

Results

Balance was operationalized as the difference between available and desired influence: Balance = (Perceived Influence) - (Desired Influence). The balance variable was trichotomized into three categories at natural cut off points, that allowed approximately equal sample sizes in each category. Thus, three states of balance were studied: saturation, equilibrium and deprivation. Likewise, desired and perceived influence were also trichotomized into three equal categories of high, medium and low. The transformations were performed on both the specific and the general indices of influence.

It was hypothesized that reactions to the job will be related to the balance state of an individual. Specifically, it was predicted that overall job satisfaction will be most positive for employees who are at a state of balance equilibrium. That is, employees who perceive having approximately as much influence as they would like to have are expected to be more satisfied than employees who perceive having too much, or too little inluence.

In order to verify the merit of the balance conceptualization beyond the direct measure of perceived degree of influence, separate analyses of variance were performed. Firstly the relationship between the components of the balance variable and job satisfaction was studied. This was done for both general and specific influence. A separate analysis then examined the relationship between balance and job satisfaction. Hence a total of 6 separate analyses of variance were performed. The results of these analyses are summarized in Table 2. It can be seen that no

significant difference between groups of employees with high, medium and low desire for participation (F=.23, NS). This is not surprising; desired influence was not expected to, and did not bear a significant relationship to employee reactions. As expected, perceived influence was significantly related to job satisfaction (F=18.58 and F=20.19, $p < .01$). Participation balance was also significantly related to job satisfaction (F=10.51 and F=15.26, $p < .01$). Thus it is clear from Table 2 that the first part of the hypothesis was confirmed by the data.

Insert Table 2 About Here

Table 3 displays the mean ratings for job satisfaction for each category of perceived influence and participation balance. The significance of the balance conceptualization is reinforced by the distribution of means in Table 3. Perceived influence was found to have a positive linear relationship to job satisfaction. The more influence that employees felt they had, the more satisfied they were with their job. But, individuals at an equilibrium state of balance (with desired influence more or less equal to perceived influence) were found to report the highest degree of job satisfaction.

The predicted inverse-U-shaped relationship between balance and job satisfaction was evident only with the discrepancy measure of participation. The different patterns of job satisfaction scores in Table 3 support the merit of an individual balance measure over the simple measure of perceived influence. The more

influence and participation that people have, the higher the reported job satisfaction. But, when individual desire for participation is taken into consideration, it is those people who have as much participation as they find desireable that are the most satisfied. Hence the data confirmed the hypotheses about the different patterns of job satisfaction between the simple measure of perceived influence and the balance discrepancy scores.

Insert Table 3 About Here

The balance hypothesis suggests that the greater the discrepancy between the desired and the available influence, the less an individual will be satisfied with his/her job. The predicted relationship could also be tested by employing the absolute differences between PI and DI as independent predictors (correlates) of the dependent variable of interest (Job Satisfaction). In performing a correlation analysis based on absolute differences we are accounting for the maximum amount of variability that is present within each of the 3 analysis of variance categories. Table 4 presents the results of this procedure.

Insert Table 4 About Here

It can be seen that the difference scores were significantly correlated with job satisfaction. The larger the discrepancy between the desired and available influence, the lower the

reported job satisfaction. Perceived influence bore a significant positive relationship to satisfaction; the balance variable was negatively related to satisfaction, as predicted by the model. This analysis provides additional confirmation of the hypothesis.

Discussion

Various psychometric problems are typically associated with difference scores (Wall & Payne, 1973; Cronbach & Furby, 1970). The use of partial correlations as suggested by Wall & Payne (1973) was judged inappropriate here due to the curvilinear relationships predicted and observed. But the distribution of means, and the significant relationship of the absolute discrepancy scores confirmed the research hypothesis.

Two foci of the present study should be noted. Firstly, the extension of the conceptualization of participation balance to include the degree of influence (i.e. the extent of influence that an employee has on the PDM process). Second, the contribution of the balance notion beyond that of perceived influence.

An element missing in the Alutto & Belasco (1972) work is the comparison of the balance measure to its two components in the predictability of job satisfaction (Locke, 1976). The present effort verified the unique effects (correlates) of the difference scores as compared to the components. Perceived influence bore a linear, positive relationship to job satisfaction. But the balance variable verified a curvilinear relationship, such that individuals who are at a state of equilibrium reported the highest level of satisfaction. Hence, there is reason to assume

that the balance conceptualization is qualitatively different from perceived influence when one measures degree of influence. Alutto & Belasco (1972) did not clarify this point in their study on the effects of scope balance (i.e., number of decisions). Future research should verify this issue.

With regards to specific influence, individuals who are at a state of equilibrium were not significantly more satisfied than those who are at a state of saturation. The correlational analyses did support the curvilinear relationships predicted both with specific and general measures of influence. These are more powerful tests of a relationship than the analysis of variance. Nevertheless, the different nature of specific and general influence in the analyses of variance is interesting and should be further explored in forthcoming research.

Balance between available and desired influence was related to job satisfaction. This may be important for management practices of selection, promotion and training. For example, in the process of implementing quality circles, and in the process of hiring new employees into an organization where quality circles already exist, it is important to keep the observed relationships in mind. An employee who is offered more or less influence than he/she finds desireable is likely to be unhappy. Employees who do not have as much influence as they desire are also likely to be frustrated and unhappy. The negative reactions of overeducated employees, with unrealistic or unmet expectations from their jobs, have been documented in previous work (Porter, Lawler & Hackman, 1975; Wanous, 1980). The present effort suggests that a match between the individual desire for

participation and his/her permitted participation will lead to the most positive reactions to the job.

A note of caution should be drawn with regards to inferences about causality. All data reported here were collecetd at one point in time. Although previous research has suggested a causal link between participation and job satisfaction (Lowin, 1968; White, 1978) the present data do not permit such inferences.

The complex nature of the concept of participation, as presented here, probably transfers into the balance framework. Individuals may be decisionally deprived and saturated at the same time. They want to take part in some decisions that they currently can't, but, at the same time they may be expected to participate in other decisions in which they are not interested. Hence, when discussing the degree of available influence, the scope of influence should be taken into account. In other words, the question may not be "how much influence do you have" or "how much do you participate", but rather "how much influence do you have on decision X and decision Y". And similarly, "how much influence would you like to have on decisions X and Y". The integration of "degree" and "scope" of influence in this fashion should promote our understanding of the participation concept and strengthen our ability to analyze and predict the outcomes of participatory interventions.

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Table 1

Scales Included in the Survey Instrument

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha
Influence	
Perceived Specific Influence	.897
Perceived General Influence	.741
Desired Specific Influence	.865
Desired General Influence	.838
Reactions	
Job Satisfaction	.823

Note:

1. Several other measures were included in the survey instrument, but were not used in the present study.

Table 2

Relationship between Participation Perceptions[1] and Overall Job Satisfaction
(n=757)

Specific Influence	F Value
Desired	.23
Perceived	18.58*
Balance	10.51*
General Influence	
Desired	1.24
Perceived	20.19*
Balance	15.26*

** Significant at $p < .01$

Note:

1. Table 2 summarizes six separate analyses. An analysis of variance was performed to determine if there was a significant difference between groups of employees with high, medium and low ratings of desired influence (F=.23). A second analysis examined the differences between high, medium and low perceived influence (F=18.58*). A third analysis examined the effects of the three categories of balance on job satisfaction (F=10.51*). Etc.

Table 3

Means of Job Satisfaction
by Level of Perceived Influence and Participation Balance
(n=757)

Specific Influence[1]	Mean Job Sat. by Influence	Level of Balance[2]
High (Saturated)	5.15*	5.03
Medium (Equilibrium)	4.95*	5.06
Low (Deprived)	4.71*	4.74*
General Influence		
High (Saturated)	5.24*	5.00*
Medium (Equilibrium)	4.96*	5.11*
Low (Deprived)	4.69*	4.71*

Notes:

1. Low, medium, high refers to levels of specific influence; Saturated, equilibrium, deprived refers to levels of participation balance.

2. * indicates means that are significantly different from each other based on the Duncan Post Hoc test.

Table 4

Zero Order Correlations between
Participation Balance(absolute values) and Job satisfaction
(n=757)

	Job Sat
Balance Specific Influence | PI1 - DI1 |	-.14**
Balance General Influence | PI2 - DI2 |	-.16**
PI1	.24**
DI1	.01
PI2	.27**
DI2	.00

** significant at p<.001